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Sailing the high seas in 3D: The Flying Dutchman goes hi-tech

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3D goggles might be commonplace at the cinema, but few associate the opera with digital technology, or would ever expect to wear 3D goggles in a theatre.

A new production of The Flying Dutchman, created by Victorian Opera and Deakin Motion.Lab, and featuring the Australian Youth Orchestra, is set to challenge these assumptions.

Premiering February 14 at St. Kilda's Palais Theatre, *The Flying Dutchman* brings together digital environments, CGI characters and live performers for a spectacular interpretation of Richard Wagner's beloved opera. The production uses modern cinematic techniques – polarised screens and powerful stereoscopic projectors – to bring a new spin to performing arts in general, and opera in particular.

The Dutchman and the deep

With its violent storms, mythical characters, enormous ghost ship, and thrilling tale of supernatural love, *The Flying Dutchman* merges a fantastical story with Richard Wagner's epic score.

The opera draws on nautical folklore of a doomed ghost ship, telling the story of Captain Daland and his crew's encounter with the Flying Dutchman's ghost ship in the middle of a storm. Daland meets the Dutchman himself, a shadowy man cursed to sail the seven seas for all eternity.

Once every seven years, the Dutchman is given the opportunity to find a good and faithful wife, and to finally be freed of his curse. Daland offers his daughter, Senta, to the Dutchman ... for a price. The end, which sees Senta and the Dutchman united beneath the waves, is both tragic and redemptive – exactly the recipe for an epic opera.

As a character, the Dutchman has been the subject of pop culture for centuries, appearing to great acclaim in Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. In Wagner's interpretation of the myth, Daland's inner battle between helping the Dutchman and feeding his greed becomes the focus of the opera.

Wagner and the totality of art

When it first premiered in 1843 in Dresden, *The Flying Dutchman* encapsulated the idea of

Gesamtkunstwerk, or “total artwork” – the perfect merging of all media including theatre, literature, art, design and music. Wagner didn’t coin the term, but his operas have come to represent this notion of the totality of art, in which media converges and the lines between art-forms become blurred.

The sheer scale of Wagner’s operas lends itself to the use of digital and computer-generated 3D media. As fans of opera will be aware, the Ring Cycle has already been given a partial digital make-over at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, directed by Robert Lepage.

Lepage’s extensive mechanical set, which elevated performers on stage and transformed into representations of fjords, horses, an underwater world or the mythical Valhalla, was overlaid with interactive digital imagery. Despite wonderful moments of imagery, the creaks and groans of Lepage’s mechanical machine, as well as the exorbitant expense of mounting the production, will most likely defer the re-staging of that particular Ring.



The Ring Cycle at the Metropolitan Opera. Taaalia/Flickr BY-SA

Bringing the opera to new audiences

Deakin Motion.Lab has embarked on a major partnership with Victorian Opera (funded by the Australian Research Council Linkage Grant Scheme) to develop full digital scenographies for three operas and to test the creative possibilities for digital technology in traditional and non-traditional environments.

Underlying these research aims is a question about how digital technology might make opera economically viable to tour more widely, including to audiences in rural or regional settings. Because large set-pieces have found new incarnations as weightless digital objects, the trappings of large-scale and epic opera productions become easily transportable to any space with a screen.

Unlike Lepage’s Ring, this production of *The Flying Dutchman* takes full advantage of digital technology, using a much more minimal set than is normally required.

It has been carefully designed by designer Christina Smith and Matt Scott to integrate the visual perspective of the 3D images. This approach greatly reduces the need for sets or props to be shifted between scenes, or to be stored between seasons.

The project also examines how digital technology might attract new audiences for opera, in particular younger generations who are already comfortable with 3D imagery and the interactive technology that drives the gaming industry. By creating the opera sets using game engine software, artists can provide opportunities for interactivity with the performers onstage.

Almost as if they were creating a film, cameras fly over the ocean at speed. They zoom in on the ship to take audiences inside the Dutchman's vessel or moving along the roads to meet the Flying Dutchman as it makes berth at the harbour. Within these epic landscapes, digital scenography creates depth and volume that is unhindered by the size of the stage itself.

Digital characters will populate the world of The Flying Dutchman, and unlike human actors, these characters are not bound by gravity or the limitations the human body. For that reason, supernatural characters like ghosts are ideal to represent as digital avatars, doubling or tripling the size of the performing cast.

In this version of The Flying Dutchman, ghostly crews aflame with the blue glow of St Elmo's fire populate the Dutchman's ship. Deakin Motion.Lab's artists, coders and 3D character animators are able to draw from human movements and actions using motion capture technology, which provide the movement cues for the digital characters.

Over the next two years, Deakin Motion.Lab will work with Victorian Opera on two more productions, investigating the potential to take trans-media performance further. Hopefully this will give traditional works, like Wagner's operas, a new life in non-traditional venues and attract younger audiences.

The Flying Dutchman plays at the Palais Theatre in Melbourne on February 14, 17 and 19. Details [here](#).

